

To begin: *novelty*. Itself associated with beginnings, novelty has for some time now interested me as an aesthetic in its own right—a sensibility for the unusual or the unexpected, which is misleading because “the” might imply a knowable object. Instead, I refer to an incessant pursuit for nothing in particular but rather what do not yet know I aesthetically desire. But what can it mean to have not an Burkean “appetite” but a hunger for freshness itself? Is it possible, logically or otherwise, to have an insatiable taste for the necessarily inarticulable? Taste for tastes in a way that is less akin to stamp collecting than to . . . a transient and elliptical sensory event? “Ellipsis,” writes Roland Barthes, is “a misunderstood figure [and] disturbs because it represents the dreadful freedom of language” (RB 80). *These* ellipses, though “not supported,” are nevertheless “anything but meaningless”; they come from a text that is “not operative: there is no *antecedent* to the logical transformations it proposes” (80, original emphasis). An odd notion of *beginning* for Barthes, then: genesis without cause coupled with a self-described “selfish” aestheticism (3), hungry for more such inventions, and without explanation why or how. Textual textures. Textural timbres (65). Flavors (96). “Liking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments . . . (but he doesn’t like the ends: the risk of the rhetorical clause is too great)” (94). Better quit now before I get too far ahead.

My guess is that Barthes and I would each score highly on Marvin Zuckerman’s “Sensation Seeking Scale,” a series of sociological tests he and some colleagues developed in the late 1960s to gauge one’s propensity for “a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (10). Although Zuckerman’s work reports the demonstrable tendency of so called “sensation seekers” to engage in relatively high levels of promiscuous activities like drugs, sex, and other risky activities that “involve speed and movement beyond the ordinary range” like skydiving (10), his research also uncovers many interesting relationships between risk taking and other, less behavioral and more philosophical preferences. One such tendency of import for Barthes involves a tolerance on the part of sensation seekers for ambiguity, where “intolerance for ambiguity represents a tendency to react to ambiguous ideas or situations as a threat rather than a challenge” (264).¹ Aporia and paradox, then, might pose a relatively lower threat to the sensation seeker, who might have a taste—a delight?—in working through the murky questions of rhetorical studies and aesthetics in the academy. However, “the high-sensation seeker may find the usual kind of large lecture class extremely boring and may seek stimulation in nonacademic pursuits” (Zuckerman 235; cf. Barthes 25; Barthes, *Rustle* 332-342). My sense is that this desire for ambiguity is perhaps better described as a desire for an as yet unknown subtly in *sensation*, novelty in textual experience that clarity and order would necessarily minimize. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* opens with a serious [typo] series of photographs from the author’s life and an im/precise logic for their inclusion: “I have kept only the images which enthrall me *without my knowing why* (such ignorance is the very nature of fascination)” (3, original emphasis). The positioning of ignorance as a necessary precursor to fascination

¹ On a survey instrument, “the items are generalized expressions of the intolerance of ambiguity; for example, ‘I have always felt there is a clear difference between right and wrong’; or ‘I don’t like to work on a problem unless there is a possibility of coming out with a clear-cut and unambiguous answer’” (Zuckerman 264). A related experiment which asked participants to describe their friends also found a dissolution of clarity: “the results suggest that high-sensation seekers conceive of their social acquaintances in more complex ways than low-sensation seekers” (Zuckerman 242; cf. Barthes, RB 48-49).

brings to bear major consequences on the notion of novelty. Barthes seems to suggest that *knowledge* as a immovable set of practical data, perhaps knowledge as interpretive *techné*, is somehow uninteresting *because* procedural or pragmatic. One photo in the opening collection shows what appears to be a young Barthes in a school play. The caption recalls his distraction while reciting his lines: “I was fascinated by the temptation of *thinking about something else*” (33, original emphasis). Especially important here is the noncommittal posture with which Barthes undertakes his flighty readings of not merely the text but the world. *Something else*—but not anything in particular. The gesture is one of an interpretive joyride, a “cruise,” or perhaps a butterfly’s shuttle (72). Motion.

This taste for interpretive tastes goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. John Poulakos, for example, associates the Sophists with “the novel, the unusual, that prior to which we have no awareness, the unprecedented” (41). His favorite example is Hippias, who reportedly said in conversation with Socrates “I always try and say something new” (qtd. in Poulakos 41). Poulakos cites but does not unpack a number of other fragments on novelty, among them Diogenes Laertius’ report on Protagoras in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: “He used to say that soul was nothing apart from the senses, as we learn from Plato in the *Theaetetus*, and that everything is true” (IX 8 [51]). If we follow the trail to the dialog, we find Socrates in great distress over his reading of Protagoras. *Let me get this straight*: “things appear, or may be supposed to be, to each one such as he perceives them? . . . Perception is always of existence, and being the same as knowledge is unerring?” “Clearly,” responds Theaetetus (152c).

Plato shortly thereafter takes up a critique of this relativism associated with Protagoras and other Sophists he frames in terms of motion: “I am about to speak of a high argument, in which all things are said to be relative; you cannot rightly call anything by any name, such as great or small, heavy or light, for the great will be small and the heavy light—there is no single thing or quality, but out of motion and change and admixture all things are becoming relatively to one another, which ‘becoming’ is by us incorrectly called being, for nothing ever is, but all things are becoming” (152d). We wind up in a theory of the cosmos Barthes might have liked as an aesthetic or inventional attitude. Plato goes on to underscore the beneficent and generative motion in fire, exercise, and a number of other areas as understood by the Sophists. While his summation so far seems to jive with Barthes’ emphasis on motion, here Plato marks a sharp disjunction that warrants careful attention: “And what of the mental habit? Is not the soul informed, and improved, and preserved by study and attention, which are motions; but when at rest, which in the soul only means want of attention and study, is uninformed, and speedily forgets whatever she has learned?” (153b-153c). A number of assumptions with regard to knowledge, learning, and pedagogy in this last citation of Plato’s analogical reasoning mark points of contention with Barthes’ aesthetic sensation seeking. While I hardly intend to launch a full blown comparative analysis between Barthes and Protagoras by Plato’s account, I do want to suggest that their compatibility up until this point and their disjunction thereafter is telling and crucial for Barthes’ aesthetics.

It is not at all clear that Barthes would associate the kind of learning that demands attention with motion, and in fact there are a number of places where “learning” in a traditional sense takes a backseat to *making*, which appears explicitly as a truer kind of motion: “When I say that a word is beautiful, when I use it because I like it, it is never by virtue of its sonorous charm or of the originality of its meaning, or of a ‘poetic’ combination of the two. The word transports me because of the notion that *I am going to do something with it*: it is the thrill of a future praxis, something like an *appetite*. This desire makes the entire motionless char of language vibrate” (129, original emphasis). Vibration, gyration—*now we’re moving!* “It is not the *erotic*,” or a knowable, accessible form known as The Erotic,

“but *eroticization* which is a positive value. Eroticization is a production of the erotic” (62). Hence for Barthes it “it is necessary to posit a paradigm in order to produce a meaning and then to be able to divert, to alter it” (92). What would such a paradigm be? A “new science,” perhaps, one he playfully dubs “*barthmology*” (67 original emphasis). Its bases, of course, are motion and novelty: “it will overturn the habitual instances of expression, of reading, and of listening (‘truth,’ ‘reality,’ ‘sincerity’); its principle will be a shock” (67). *Surprise!* And yet there is recurring anxiety in Barthes associated with the use of language (*any use?*), one that at times causes him great pain and at other times he’s quite comfortable dismissing as inconsequential or irrelevant. He laments, for example, that “(unfortunately I am condemned to assertion: we lack in French [and perhaps in every language] a grammatical mode which would speak *lightly*)” (55, all parentheses Barthes’). But this certainly doesn’t stop him.

Works Cited

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